

SERILAISED STORIES FROM THE IRANIAN EPIC
SHAHNAMEH - PESHDAAD

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INTRODUCTION

The Shahnameh, which literally means "The Book of Kings," is an Iranian epic poetry in Persian language. It was composed about a thousand years ago by a poet who is better known by his pen-name Firdausi Toosi. Though this epic poetry has been translated into English, the literal translations in prose do not have the charm and fluency of the original and hence an attempt has been made in this book to simplify and present the Shahnameh in a story book format without losing out on the chronology and content of the original work.

The emphasis in this book is on making the stories lucid, interesting and easy to read. This book is meant for casual and leisurely reading and is not an academic translation. Moreover, folklores and narratives relating to a king, which are not found in the Shahnameh but are present in some other sources, have also been included in this translation.

This book deals only with Peshdad, the first of the five dynasties of Iran. Furthermore, though great paladins like Sam, Zal and Rustom belonged to this period, only those episodes in which the paladins are a necessary part of the main narrative are included in this book. Their life and exploits will be exclusively and extensively dealt with in a separate book just dedicated to them.

The Peshdadian dynasty belongs to pre-historic period and hence the sketches in this book are purely imaginary and have been included in the book for the purpose of making the book more interesting for children.

I would like to humbly submit that my knowledge of the Persian language is very elementary and though I have referred to the original, I have greatly relied on Gujarati and English translations of the Shahnameh for this book.

It is a sincere hope that this book and other books in this series will quench the thirst for knowledge for Iranian history and culture amongst young and old alike and find a place in the heart and home of all lovers of Iran.

Bombay, June 1996.

Ramiyar Parvez Karanjia.

FIRDAUSI TOOSI

Birth

“My son is shouting from the rooftop and is getting thunderous applause from all around,” said Fakhruddin Ahmed bin Farrokh, a squire of royal lineage, to Najibuddin Muabbar narrating his dream of the night before. Najibuddin, a dream interpreter assured him that it was a very welcome dream and portended that his son would be famous in all the four corners of the world and his fame will echo in the world long after him.

The dream proved to be true to the hilt. In about 935 A.D. a son was born to Fakhruddin Ahmed in the village Shadab which was situated in the ancient city of Toos in Khorasan. The child was named Abul Qasim Hasan. He grew up to immortalize himself under the pen-name Firdausi, by composing the ***Shahnameh***, “Book of Kings” comprising 60,000 Persian couplets containing the history and legends of prehistoric and historic Iran with all their greatness and pettiness, romance and tragedies, heroes and villains, glory and shame.

Early years

Certain biographers trace Firdausi's ancestry right upto the great Iranian hero Sam-e-Nariman saying that Firdausi's ancestors were Zoroastrians converted to Islam. Right from a very early age Firdausi was enthralled by the stories of great Iranian kings and heroes. He had his early education under the able guidance of his learned father Fakhruddin Ahmed who himself was a renowned preacher of his times. Firdausi was an avid learner and he never missed an opportunity to find out more about religion, history, literature and poetry. He learnt the art of prosody from Asadi Toosi, the well-known poet of Toos.

Firdausi had good knowledge of Arabic, Farsi and Pahlavi languages and he started reading all the books on Iranian history over which he could lay his hands. He also had access to the Avesta scriptures along with its Pahlavi translations. He talked at length with Zoroastrian priests and other elders of the country and learnt a lot about history and traditions of ancient Iran while conferring with them during his formative years.

Firdausi had an innate liking towards nature and natural phenomena right since childhood. He would sit for hours on end on the banks of the river in Toos. Firdausi's love of nature is greatly reflected in his poetical compositions. As he entered his youth he started gathering Pahlavi and Arabic literature relating to ancient and modern Iran and started working on his hobby of composing episodes from ancient Iranian history.

Firdausi's friend Mohammed Lashkari greatly helped him in his quest for gathering material for the Shahnameh. Before Firdausi could realise, his hobby became a passion and later resulted into his life-long mission.

Royal Patron

Very soon Firdausi realized that the Herculean task he was to undertake of recreating in verse the entire history of ancient Iran, would not be possible without financial backing from some wealthy patron. Meanwhile, the first episode of ***Faridun and Zohak*** that Firdausi composed became so popular that news of his poetic prowess reached Abu Mansur, the Governor of Toos who greatly appreciated Firdausi's work and promised to give him patronage.

The Governor was a very sympathetic and generous patron, but his support did not last long, as soon after taking Firdausi under his patronage, he passed away. This was a great blow to Firdausi, but he came to terms with it and continued with his work of versifying episodes from Iranian history for the next 20 years till he reached the age of 58.

Sultan Mahmud of Gazni

At about this time, in 996 A.D. Sultan Mahmud came to throne in Gazni, which was situated to the south of Toos. He was a great patron of art and learning and was very much interested in having the entire history of Iran versified. To this effect, he had many Arabic and Pahlavi manuscripts collected, notable among which was the ***Khudā nāmeh***, a collection of historical stories and legends dating back to the times of Sasanian Emperor Yazdegard Shahryar, who had them collected and chronologically arranged in a book form by a Zoroastrian poet named Danishwar Dehkan. One of the meanings of the word ***khudā*** in Pahlavi is “king” and hence the name of the book ***Khudā nāmeh***.

This book was based on another Pahlavi book ***Bāstān nāmeh***, which was compiled at the behest of Sasanian Emperor Noshirwan Adel. The Sultan also had in his possession a few episodes of versified Iranian history revolving round the life of prophet Zarathushtra, composed by a Zoroastrian poet Dakiki who was murdered under tragic circumstances at the hands of his own slave.

Firdausi goes to Gazni

When the Sultan came to know about Firdausi's poetic prowess and historical knowledge, he asked the Governor of Toos to request Firdausi to come to Gazni. Firdausi, thrilled by the invitation of the Sultan, set off for Gazni, through Herat, in 999 A.D. along with his poetic treasure, a result of years of toil.

When the court poets came to know about the Sultan's invitation to Firdausi, the demon of envy engulfed them. Two of the court poets Ansari and Rudaki, instigated by the court clerk Badauddin wrote a letter to Firdausi saying that it would not be worthwhile for him to come to Gazni. He would just be wasting his time, as the Sultan would not appreciate his talent. On receiving this letter Firdausi was in a quandary as to the future course of his action. He waited in a rest-house in Gazni praying to God to guide him.

Firdausi's prayers were soon answered, as a rift arose between Badauddin and the court poets as to who was guilty in misleading Firdausi. The poets put the blame on Badauddin which enraged the court cleric, who immediately wrote another letter to Firdausi asking him to ignore his previous letter as it was written out of jealousy by the instigation of court poets. Relieved, Firdausi resumed his journey to Gazni.

Firdausi with the court poets

On reaching Gazni, Firdausi decided to rest in a public park where, incidentally, three of the Sultan's court poets Ansari, Asjadi and Farrokhi were feasting. The court poets were unhappy about Firdausi coming to Gazni, so when they saw Firdausi, they decided to deride him and keep him away from reaching the court of the Sultan.

The court poets hit upon a plan to humiliate Firdausi. “We are court poets,” Ansari curtly told Firdausi as he approached them. “If you want to avail of our company, you should be able to prove your poetic prowess by completing the fourth line of a quartet that we recite to you.” So saying the trio composed a quartet, the first three lines of which would end with such words, that it would not be possible to find a fourth word with that rhyme in the Persian language.

Ansari started, followed by Asjadi and Farrokhi :

Chu areze to māh nabāshad raushan,

“Even the moon is not as radiant as your face,”

Mānandah rokht gol nabuvad dar golshan,

“There is no rose in the garden as beautiful as your cheeks.”

Mezganat gozar hami konad dar jaushan,
 “Your eyelashes can pierce even an armour,”

The three waited triumphantly for Firdausi to accept defeat, but on the contrary Firdausi confidently completed the quartet with the following line:

Mānandah sanāne Giv dar jange Pashan.
 “Just as the spear of Giv in the battlefield of Pashan.”

The trio of Ansari, Asjadi and Farrokhi were utterly crestfallen, not so much for the failure of their plan, but for the spontaneity and panache with which Firdausi finished the quartet, for which they thought no rhyme existed. Never before had they heard about the battlefield of Pashan and they were at first over-awed and then jealous at Firdausi's immense knowledge of Iranian history. They went away leaving Firdausi alone in the park. Fortunately for Firdausi, he met Māhak, who was a sympathetic man and a courtier of the Sultan. He took Firdausi to his house.

At the court of Sultan Mahmud

The next day Sultan Mahmud ordered his seven court poets to present before him episodes from Iranian history which he had asked them to versify. After the poets read out their episodes, Māhak read the episode of Rustom and Aspandiyar which Firdausi had sent with him to be presented before the Sultan. The Sultan was highly impressed by the composition and inquired about its author. When Māhak told the Sultan that it was by the renowned poet Firdausi, the Sultan expressed a desire to see Firdausi in the court.

The following day Māhak took Firdausi to the Sultan who paid rich tributes to Firdausi's poetic skills. The Sultan then asked him about the origin of his name ***Firdausi***. The poet related the tale about his grand-father having a garden by the name Firdaus from which he got his name.

Thereafter the Sultan asked him about his second name ***Toosi*** to which Firdausi narrated the episode of the Kayanian hero Toos who was sent by King Kaekhushroo to fight against the Turanian Afrasiyab but was warned not to go through Kalāt as the Emperor's half-brother Farud ruled there and the Emperor did not want Toos to get into a fight with him. Toos, however, did not heed the King's warning and went through Kalāt. Farud tried to block his way, a fight ensued between the two, and inadvertently Farud was killed. After this incident, Toos was so afraid to face the King, that he hid in a small province for several months. This place later came to be known as Toos from the name of the warrior.

Firdausi is selected

The Sultan was highly impressed by Firdausi's knowledge of ancient Iranian history. At the Sultan's behest Firdausi recited a few verses which he had composed. So dazzled was the Sultan by Firdausi's metrical style and poetic technique that he immediately commissioned him to compose the Shahnameh and promised him a gold coin for every couplet that he wrote.

In the palace he was given a special room adorned with pictures of Iranian warriors, kings and heroes. The room was further embellished with weapons, armours and other martial paraphernalia, along with sketches of animals like horses, elephants and camels to give Firdausi a feel of battle-fronts. None was allowed to go into this room except the Sultan's trusted slave Ayaz who later became a close confidante of Firdausi.

All these favours of the Sultan made Firdausi very happy and at the same time gave rise to envy among many of the poets and courtiers who, thereafter, did not let go a single occasion to harass

Firdausi. The most envious were the court poets whose opportunity of composing the Shahnameh had slipped away right before their eyes.

Firdausi carried on his work with renewed passion profusely thanking God for the opportunity given to him. Regularly he would compose episodes and take them to the court to be read out before the Sultan. After one such reading the highly impressed Sultan exclaimed “Firdausi, you are indeed from Firdaus (Paradise)! By your beautiful poetry you have transformed my court into Firdaus (Paradise).”

The trouble begins

Envious of Firdausi’s success, his detractors started instigating the Sultan that Firdausi was giving too much importance and heaping a lot of praise on the Iranian Kings of the Kayanian dynasty, especially king Kaekhushroo. The Sultan fell prey to their instigation and started behaving with indifference towards Firdausi.

Unaware about this scheming, Firdausi was at a loss to understand the reason of Sultan's displeasure, and were it not for his friend Ayaz, he would never have known the true reason of the Sultan's displeasure.

The Sultan's ire was also directed towards Firdausi because he had composed a few verses in praise of certain noblemen of the Sultan's court. These noblemen were sending rich gifts for Firdausi which was a cause of envy to the other court poets and courtiers.

Not content at that, the envious court poets started belittling Firdausi's work before the Sultan saying that the popularity of his Shahnameh was not due to his poetic or linguistic skill, but due to the heroic and romantic content of ancient Iranian history which tugged at the heart-strings of his admirers.

Firdausi lives up to his reputation:

Next day the Sultan decided to try out Firdausi's poetic skills by asking him to versify the simple episode of the great warrior Rustom's fight with the Kushan warrior Ashkabus. Firdausi asked for some time and in his inimitable style wove such fantastic verses there and then in the court that till date those verses are regarded as some of the best examples of Persian poetry. The skill with which Firdausi dramatized the simple action of Rustom shooting a lone arrow killing Ashkabus drew such thunderous applause that Firdausi's greatness was established beyond any doubt in the court of the Sultan. Here is a sample of that episode with its free English translation:

Be mālid chāchi kamān rā ba dast

Ba charme gavzan andar āvard shast

Rustom selected a taut arrow from his belt,
Rubbing his hands, the Chachi bow he bent.

Sutun kard chap rāo, kham kard rāst

Khursh az khame, charkhe chāchi be khāst

He inserted his thumb in the tough stag hide,
Straightened his left arm and curved his right.

Chu sufārash āmad ba pahnāe gush

Ze charkhe gavzanān ar āmad khurush

A whistle arose from the curve of the bow,
When to his ear reached the notch of arrow.

Chu paykān be busid angushte uy

Guzar kard az mohr-e poshte uy

A twang came from the stag hide of the bow,
As the knuckles of his hand kissed the arrow.

Ch zad tir ba sin-e ashkabus,

Spahar ān zamān daste u dād bus

He shot it straight against Ashkabus' breast,
Low stooped the sky and kissed the hero's hand.

Kazā goft giro, kadar goft deh,

Falak goft ahsan, malak goft zeh.

“Take” said Fate, “Well-done” shouted the Heavens,
“Give” said Destiny, “Bravo” said the angels.

Kashāni ham andar zamān jān be-dād,

To gofti ke u khud ze mādar na-zād.

Instantly dropped dead the great Kushan,
You might say, of his mother, he was never born.

These tantalizing verses sent the Sultan into raptures and he exclaimed, “These verses are worth all the treasures gathered by Rustom in Kabulistan with the might of his arms.” The Sultan and his courtiers spent the rest of the day talking about the mighty Rustom and his escapades, his bravery and wisdom, his humanity and tenderness, his war acumen and courage.

Rustom visits Firdausi

That night Rustom visited Firdausi in his dream in full armour, exactly as Firdausi had described him in his poetry. He bowed and saluted to Firdausi and with gratitude in his eyes said, “Words cannot express the obligation that I feel towards you. O Firdausi ! You have rejuvenated my memory and revived the lost glory of ancient Iran. I want to thank you by showering you with boundless wealth, but now that I am no more in your world, I cannot fulfill that wish of mine.

However, I remember that once during a duel with an opponent, his jewel-studded golden chain had fallen near the gates of Muknabad and is still lying there under a mound of earth. Do me a favour and accept that chain as a token of my gratitude. Please do not deny me this favour, as that will make me very unhappy.” So saying, Rustom took out a bow from his quiver and shot it at a mound of earth where the golden chain was lying.

When Firdausi got up the next day he was convinced of the validity of his dream, but decided not to disclose it to anybody except his trusted friend Ayaz. A few days after that the Sultan announced a hunting trip to Muknabad and Firdausi expressed his desire to join the entourage, to which the Sultan readily agreed.

As the Sultan and his entourage reached the gates of Maknabad, Firdausi saw mound identical to one that he had seen in his dream, and what more, the arrow which Rustom had shot was also lying there. Firdausi pointed it out to Ayaz, had the place dug up, and true enough found the bejeweled golden chain grown black with age and dust. As was the rule of those times, the chain was handed over to the Sultan, who, after hearing of the account of its recovery handed the chain over to Firdausi, who, not keeping it for himself, had it divided amongst all the court poets.

Day by day Firdausi's popularity was growing and so was the envy of his detractors. After Firdausi finished the composition of a few thousand couplets, the Sultan ordered the promised gold coins to be given to the poet. However, Firdausi requested the Sultan to have them accumulated so that

he could collect the whole sum together. Secretly in his heart, Firdausi harbored the desire to have a strong dam built on the river in Toos and have the old Sarai (rest house) on the outskirts of Toos repaired.

Firdausi toiled for thirty-five long years and composed sixty thousand couplets immortalizing Iran's Peshdadian, Kayanian and Sasanian dynasties. Firdausi skipped the Achaemenian dynasty and made just a passing reference to the Arshkanian (Parthian) dynasty, mainly because source materials for these dynasties may not have been available to him. Moreover, there seems to have been a mix up among the last few kings of the Kayanian and Achaemenian dynasties.

Whatever its minor shortcomings, Firdausi's Shahnameh is still regarded as a masterpiece in Persian epic poetry and Firdausi is glowingly referred to as the Homer of the East. But all the accolades came later on. In his own times Firdausi was not appreciated, and he died a broken man.

The great betrayal

After finishing the Shahnameh, Firdausi presented it to the Sultan. He was a relieved man now. At the age of 71, having fulfilled his lifelong mission, he was eager to go back to his hometown Toos and fulfill his desire of helping his town by constructing a dam and renovating the Sarai with the gold coins he was to receive.

However, Firdausi's noble intentions were not to be realised. At least, not during his lifetime. The Sultan's envious minister Khwaja Hasan Maimandi instigated the Sultan against giving the gold coins to Firdausi saying that Firdausi was a simple rustic villager. He may not be able to contain his joy on seeing thousands of gold coins and die of a shock. Thus it was in the poet's interest that he be given silver coins instead. The Sultan agreed to this suggestion after some hesitation, and when Firdausi had gone to the *Hamamkhana* (public bath) the Sultan sent him sixty thousand silver coins with Ayaz.

When Firdausi came out of the bath he was shattered at being cheated of the promised rewards of his life-long exertion. He was filled with anguish for the Sultan who had broken his word and duped him of his rightful rewards. He was so much disappointed at this unexpected breach of promise that in a fit of anger he gave away twenty thousand silver coins to Ayaz, twenty thousand to the bath-house keeper and twenty thousand to the *Sherbet* (beverage) seller whom he patronized daily.

When the Sultan came to know of this he realized that Firdausi had not undertaken this toil just for money, and he saw into Hasan Maimandi's ploy to mislead him. He called the minister and reprimanded him in strong terms. Maimandi however took charge of the situation and apologized for not being able to give the right advice, but he pointed out that however disappointed Firdausi was, he should not have belittled the Sultan by giving away his rewards in this manner. The Sultan appreciated this argument and called for Firdausi the following day.

Firdausi flees Gazni

When Firdausi received the summons from the Sultan, he realized the gravity of the situation and to save his life, went before the Sultan and apologized for his behaviour. After the Sultan forgave Firdausi, he went into the Royal Mosque and wrote verses on the wall of the Mosque glorifying the Sultan.

Nevertheless he realized that it was neither wise nor safe to stay any longer in Gazni. He set his anguished thoughts on paper deriding the Sultan for his low birth and lineage, sealed the paper in an envelope and gave it to Ayaz to be delivered to the Sultan after twenty days. Firdausi then disclosed to Ayaz his plan of fleeing to Herat. Ayaz helped him by providing a horse and certain provisions necessary for the journey. After twenty days the Sultan received the sealed

letter and was furious on opening it and reading the satirical verses which Firdausi had written for him.

The following is a part from that satire:

**Agar Shāh rā shāh budi pedar,
Be-sar bar nehādi marā tāj o sar.**

If the father of the Sultan were of royal birth,
A golden crown on my head he would have bestowed.

**Va agar mādar-e shāh bānu budi
Marā sim u zar tā be zanu budi.**

Or if the king's mother were a noble lady born,
Gold and silver would have been heaped all around.

**Chu andar tubarash buzurgi na bud,
Nayārast nām-e buzurgi na-bud**

But alas, none was royal in the Sultan's ancestry,
The greatness of this book will never understood by him.

***Chu Firdausi andar Zamaneh na bud,
Bad ān bud ke bakhtesh javāneh na bud***

This Age will never see another Firdausi,
Whose only fault was that Fate was not with him.

The Sultan was enraged at reading these verses. He issued an order that Firdausi be sought immediately and punished by being trampled under an elephant's foot. However, by now, Firdausi was far away from the reach of the Sultan.

Last days of Firdausi

Firdausi had fled from Gazni and had gone to Herat, where he stayed in hiding in the book-shop of a friend. From there he went to Toos where he heard about the Sultan's decree that his head should be crushed under the foot of an elephant. Firdausi realized that the Sultan's men would come to Toos searching for him and so he fled to Tabaristan where he took refuge under its Iranian ruler Sepahbud Shahryar, who was on good terms with the Sultan but at the same time was an admirer and sympathizer of Firdausi.

In Tabaristan, Firdausi engaged himself in the work of writing a full length satire on Sultan Mahmud and his Minister Hasan Maimandi. When Shahryar came to know about this, he dissuaded Firdausi from this course as he was afraid of the wrath of the Sultan. He requested him to sell the 100 lines of satire to him for 100,000 dirhams, a thousand dirhams for each line, and later destroyed most of the satire.

From Tabaristan Firdausi proceeded to Baghdad where he composed the romantic ballad ***Yousuf & Zuleikha*** having almost 9000 couplets. This ballad was greatly appreciated by Amir Momin, the Caliph of Baghdad. Though this ballad was written in the same metre as the Shahnameh, it lacks the majesty, brilliance and fluency of Firdausi's earlier works.

The Sultan regrets his decision

A few months after passing the decree against Firdausi, Sultan Mahmud had forgotten all his fury. Moreover, he had received a letter from Sepahbud Shahryar, the King of Tabaristan, requesting him to forgive Firdausi. Incidentally, the Sultan received the letter on a Friday when he had gone to the Royal Mosque to offer Namaz. There on the wall he read the lines which

Firdausi had inscribed in his favour. Now, instead of being angry at Firdausi, he felt genuinely sorry for this old man, whom, in his heart of hearts, he believed that he had wronged.

Once while the Sultan was returning to Gazni from one of his Indian expeditions, a petty chieftain, holed up in the security of his fortress, rebelled against the Sultan. When the Sultan along with his ministers was planning a line of action, one of the ministers suggested this strong yet simple couplet to be sent as a missive to the rebel king:

Agar juz ba kāme na āyad jawāb,

Mon-o gorz, o maidān-o afrāsiyāb.

If to my command you dare not condescend,

Then in the field my mace, like Afrasiyab your end.

The Sultan was highly impressed by the strong phrasing of these lines. On inquiring about their origin he was told that they were from the Shahnameh composed by the unfortunate poet Firdausi. The Sultan felt great remorse for his treatment to the great bard and resolved to undo the wrong on reaching Gazni.

After arriving in Gazni, the Sultan ordered sixty thousand gold coins to be sent to Firdausi on his royal camels and tender his personal apologies to the great bard. But alas, it was too late, for even as the camels entered Rudbār, one of the gates of Toos, Firdausi's funeral was being carried out from the other Gate, Razān.

Firdausi passed away in 1020 A.D., a totally heart-broken, shattered and bitter old man. Even his daughter did not accept the belated award sent by the Sultan, which was later handed over to Imam Abu Bakar Ishar who expended the money for the two causes which were close to Firdausi's heart - one of building a dam on the river in Toos and the other of repairing the rest-house at Toos.

Wronged in death too

Having faced rejection and dejection all through his life, even in death Firdausi was not spared. The high priest of Tabaran, Sheikh Abul Qasim Gurgani, refused to have Firdausi's body buried in the Muslim cemetery, accusing him of heresy. According to that priest, Firdausi had devoted his entire life in singing praises of 'infidel kings.' No amount of persuasion deterred the priest and finally Firdausi was laid to rest in a garden outside the cemetery gate where the decrepit tomb of Firdausi lies till today.

That night the Sheikh saw Firdausi in dream seated in paradise on a resplendent throne surrounded by the kings and warriors he had immortalized. On being asked how he had attained such a high position, the poet replied that it was on account of the lofty concept of God and Divine Unity that he had expressed in the Shahnameh especially typified by couplets like:

Setāyash kunam izade pāk rā,

Ke guyā o binā kunad khāk rā

I offer my prayers to the Pure Worshipful One,

Who bestowed speech and sight to a lump of clay.

Ba muri dehad māleshe narrāh shir,

Kunad parshah bar pile jangi dalir

Who makes the ferocious tiger helpless before an ant,

And who gives victory to a mosquito over an elephant.

Jahānrā bulandii o pasti toi,

Nadānam toi, harche hasti toi.

The loftiest and the minutest in the world is through Thee,
I do not know Thee, I just know that everything exists through Thee.

In 1934, His Imperial Majesty, the late Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shah of Iran, had a splendid memorial erected near the tomb of Firdausi to mark the spot where the mortal remains of the great bard were buried nearly a thousand years ago.

THE PESHADIAN DYNASTY

Before the Peshdadian dynasty

We are now going to a period, which can be called not just long ago, but long, long ago. Archaeologists would like to call it late stone age. We are going back thousands of years in time when men had not yet learnt to live a settled life. They were not aware of the art of agriculture and so they had to go from one place to another in search of food. They led a nomadic life and survived on hunting and gathering whatever food they could during their wanderings. These people are now referred to as the Proto Aryans. They were the ancestors of the people who later on settled down in Europe, Iran and India.

They had already developed skills of speaking a legible language, a language which we no more know today, but which could be similar to the Avesta language of the Iranians and the Sanskrit language of the Indians. In fact, their language was the parent of both these languages. However, the skill of writing had not yet developed.

Due to severe cold in the North, lack of pasture lands and depletion of natural resources like fruits and vegetation, these people started migrating southwards. After a passage of thousands of years group from among them settled in the Iranian plains near the Aral Sea and the others migrated further southwards, most of them settling in North India near the fertile banks of the Sapta Sindhu rivers. Our story is about the ancestors of the people who later settled in the Iranian plateau and started the Iranian civilisation.

The first of the five Mazdayasni/Zoroastrian dynasties of Iran, the Peshdadian dynasty, got its name from the second King of that dynasty, Hoshang, who is known in the Avesta as ***Paradhāta***, “the first law giver.” With this dynasty starts, in a way, the history of human civilization. People started living a settled life, and several skills and trades were developed.

Revolutionary changes came about in the life-style of man during this dynasty, which saw great kings like Jamshed, Faridun and Minocheher. A few of the changes brought about by them, and certain customs introduced by them, are followed even today, after a lapse of thousands of years. It was during this period that the practice of Monotheism, that is, belief in one supreme God, was first started by the introduction of the Mazdayasni belief system by Gayomard, the first king of the Peshdadian dynasty.

The Peshdadian dynasty belongs to the prehistoric period, of which we have no documented records. We have to depend on religious scriptures, folklore and epic literature to reconstruct the events and personalities of that period. Naturally, therefore, we do come across certain discrepancies and inconsistencies in the different narratives. Moreover, we have very little material on the first and the last three kings of this dynasty.

This period is very important in the history of civilization for its sheer contribution to human development and progress due to which man was able to devote more time to what he was destined for, namely to contemplate, think, ponder and reflect on his own self and seek his own progress.

Let us now take a look at the Peshdadian dynasty and its kings, starting with the first king Kayomars or Gayomard.

KAYOMARS

Kayomars, also referred to as Gayomard in Pahlavi, is regarded as the first man on Earth. However, it is more probable that he was the progenitor of Iranian race and lineage and not of mankind. Kayomars commanded great respect from all living creatures. Fellow men as well as

all other living beings bowed their heads in reverence before him. He is even said to understand the language of animals and converse with them.

For the first time a human being commanded so much respect, awe and admiration from all creations and creatures around him. This was the beginning of the system of monarchy. Everybody accepted him as their leader, and he in turn protected them and gave them a sense of security.

Kayomars was accorded special treatment as a King. He stayed in a mountain cave, wore clothes of tiger skin, put on a crown and administered justice and guidance to his subjects. As he sat on a throne made of stone and clay, he is also known as ***Gilshah***. He taught his people to wear clothes made of tree leaves, barks and animal skins and made them live a settled, community life in tree houses and caves.

The Mazdayasni belief system

In due time, Kayomars received a revelation from Ahura Mazda through Sarosh Yazad, the divine being who brings revelations. On the basis of this revelation, for the first time in the history of mankind, he started the practice of Monotheism, that is, worship of one supreme God.

Before his time, men were perplexed by natural phenomena and worshipped all awe inspiring natural creations like the seas, mountains and trees, as well as natural phenomena like volcanoes and storms as God. Kayomars explained to his people that all natural creations were created by one supreme God, Ahura Mazda, and He alone is worthy of worship. Thus started the Mazdayasni belief system. The word Mazdayasni means “the Mazda-worshipping religion.”

The daevayasnis

Most people obeyed Kayomars and relinquished their ancient practice of worshipping physical objects and phenomena as God, but a few continued their vile ways of worshipping and invoking the black side of nature. They became sworn enemies of Kayomars and his people. They came to be known as the ***daevayasnis***, that is, people who worship ***daevas***, that is, forces opposed to nature and the advancement of mankind. The daevayasnis opposition to their King was exploited by the evil ones who started building an army against their King. This army was headed by one of the foremost daevayasni by the name of ***Siyāh dev***.

The plot of the daevayasnis planning an attack against the Mazdayasnis, was revealed to Kayomars, through an intuition by Sarosh Yazad.. He too started preparing an army comprising of humans and animals.

Kayomars' son Siyamak was made commander of this army. A battle ensued between the Mazdayasnis and the daevayasnis, in which, Siyamak was killed by Siyah dev. The death of their prince was a great blow for the Mazdayasnis. Kayomars loved his son very dearly and was shattered by his untimely death.

Kayomars went into a state of shock and shut himself off from the world for one year. Ultimately Sarosh Yazad once again intervened and consoled Kayomars. He persuaded him to control his sorrow and take charge of his royal duties. Kayomars realised the futility and negative effects of mourning. He came to himself and started grooming up his grandson Hoshang to fight against the rebellious ***daevayasnis***.

Once again the Mazdayasnis and the daevayasnis met in a fierce battle, in which Hoshang took charge of the army from the front and Kayomars stayed at the rear. In this battle the daevayasnis were completely defeated and Siyah dev was killed.

Shortly thereafter, Kayomars passed away peacefully, having reigned for thirty years. Due to his immense contribution towards the progress of mankind, he is referred to as a ***Saoshyant***, that is, a benefactor of mankind.

HOSHANG

After Kayomars, his grandson Hoshang became the King. In the Avesta, King Hoshang is given the title ***Paradhata*** “the first law giver.” It is from this title that this royal dynasty got its name ***Peshdad***. As soon as Hoshang ascended the throne, he pledged to rule with justice and compassion for the betterment of mankind.

Human Progress

King Hoshang developed the process of mining iron wherein iron was extracted from iron ore by heating and smelting it. Thus started the profession of blacksmith. For the first time iron axes, saws and spades were made.

Happy by this success, Hoshang started the practice of agriculture with improved iron implements. He taught his people the art of sowing crops and reaping harvests. He also had canals dug from rivers to fields for easy availability of water. Thus started the first irrigation system in the world giving a great boost to agriculture. People now stopped leading a nomadic life and started living in small groups, near their own fields, tilling their own personal lands.

With the development of agriculture started the practice of domesticating animals like goat, sheep, cows, bulls and donkeys. Certain animals were used for fieldwork and others for domestic purposes like guarding and riding. Gradually, people started using wool and fur of beaver and ermine as clothing.

The Majesty of Fire

Once, when King Hoshang along with his retinue had gone hunting, it so happened that suddenly a long, black slithering creature with red shiny eyes came before them. Though Firdausi has not named the creature here, from its description, it seems like an ***Azdah***, which was a large dragon like animal often mentioned at other places in the Shahnameh. It is believed that this period belonged to the Saurian age and hence some dinosaurs may still be roaming the earth at that time.

King Hoshang and a few of his soldiers followed this creature, hurling stone weapons at it. It so happened that the weapons missed their mark and hit another stone causing sparks to fly and igniting the dry branches of a tree, resulting in a huge fire.

On seeing the gigantic blaze, the soldiers were terrified and started running away. However, King Hoshang instantly recognised the majesty of Ahura Mazda in this blaze and bowed down before it offering praises to its Creator. He stopped the terrified soldiers from fleeing and exhorted, “Don't fear this majestic Fire. It is the radiance of Ahura Mazda. He who is wise shall revere it.”

Relieved by their king's assurance, the soldiers returned, bowed down before the fire and fed it with wood. At night the King and his subjects celebrated a Jashan around this fire with great zest and festivity.. This Jashan is called ***Jashan-e-Sadeh***, and is celebrated even today on Avan roz of mah Bahman. This Jashan was called ***Sadeh*** “a hundred” since it falls exactly 50 days and 50 nights before the holy days of the Gathas. The word ***Sadeh*** is also explained as the name of the tree, the dry branches of which were ignited by sparks flying from the friction, resulting in the majestic blaze.

Over here Firdausi cautions people against calling the Parsees Fire-worshippers in the following words :

Ma gui ke ātash parastā budand

Parastande-e pāk yazdān budand.

Do not call them fire worshippers,
Through fire they are worshippers of God.

Ki ātash darān gāh mihrāb bud,

Parastande rā didā purāb bud.

The fire in those time was just like the *mihrāb* (in the mosque),
The devotees look at (fire) with eyes full of (emotional) tears.

King Hoshang passed away after ruling for forty years. Like his predecessor Kayomars, he too is regarded as a *Saoshyant*, that is, a benefactor of mankind.

TEHMURASP

Tehmurasp, the son of King Hoshang, came to the throne after his father's death. After ascending the throne King Tehmurasp invited all the ministers and wise men of his kingdom and proclaimed, "I, King Tehmurasp will hold a court daily and administer justice to the best of my ability. I hereby pledge to reform and win over all *daevayasnīs* and be the lord of the whole world." Thereafter he prayed to Ahura Mazda and Ram Yazad and asked for strength to overpower all evil ones.

King Tehmurasp - The nemesis of *daevayasnīs*

The *daevayasnīs*, especially the inhabitants of the provinces of Mazandaran and Gilān, who comprised two-thirds of the *daevayasnīs*, revolted against King Tehmurasp. When King Tehmurasp came to know of this rebellion, he immediately prepared himself and his faithful soldiers for a war.

Tehmurasp with, his power and might, imprisoned two-thirds of the *daevayasnīs* and smote the rest of them. They pleaded for their lives, and promised to teach Tehmurasp new skills. The king forgave them and the *daevayasnīs* taught him the art of calligraphy, which he utilised to increase his knowledge.

Tehmurasp *Devband*

The *daevayasnīs* feared Tehmurasp so much that it is allegorically stated in the Shahnameh that he placed a saddle over Ahriman, the chief of evil ones, and rode him like a rider riding a horse. Due to his excellent command over the *daevayasnīs*, Tehmurasp was referred to as *devband*, that is, "one who held the *daevayasnīs* captive."

Human Progress

Tehmurasp established new cities like Isfahan, Marv and Balkh. He taught his subjects the art of weaving cloth from animal hair and making garments from it. Apart from domesticating animals, Tehmurasp also instructed his subjects to subjugate and utilise for hunting certain wild animals and birds like the fox, leopard, falcon and kite. He also taught his people the need to domesticate a rooster and keep it as a household pet. He emphatically impressed upon his subjects that God had made man superior to other creations, and this alone was reason enough to be ever grateful to the great Lord and regularly pray to Him.

The Famine

Once there was a great famine in the kingdom of Tehmurasp. To avert this calamity, Tehmurasp advised his people to have only one meal per day and distribute the rest of their daily quota of food to the poor and needy who were dying of hunger. This practice averted the ill effects of the calamity to a great extent.

The wise Minister Shidasp

Tehmurasp had a wise Minister by the name of Shidasp who regularly received divine guidance. He used to seldom talk and devoted most of his leisure time to prayers. Shidasp also knew astrology and always gave insightful and inspired advice to the King. In the Shahnameh Firdausi remarks that if the Minister was so wise, how much wiser would the King have been.

Tehmurasp passed away after ruling for thirty years and instilling many arts and skills in his subjects.

JAMSHED

The fourth King of the Peshdadian dynasty to adorn the throne of ancient Iran was the radiant and glorious Jamshed. Not only the Mazdayasnis, but even the daevayasnis regarded him as their King. Though Firdausi refers to him as Tehmurasp's son, the Avestan scriptures refer to him as the grandson of Tehmurasp and son of Vivanghan.

Vivanghan was the first person to perform the Haoma ceremony and invoke Hom Yazad as a result of which he was blessed with an illustrious son, Jamshed, who grew up to be a very devoted Yazdan-parast, that is, worshipper of one God.

He had great faith in other divine beings of the Mazdayasni belief system. He invoked the help of Avan Yazad, Ram Yazad and Mino Ashishwangh on different occasions and received boons whereby he could prosper God's creations and overpower evil in the world.

The Golden Age

King Jamshed was a divinely inspired King. He had received the *Kayanian Khoreh* (Divine Glory for the Royals) for his devotion and obedience to God and commitment towards his Royal duties. His divinity was evident on his brilliant and pious face. So devoted was King Jamshed to the cause of furthering God's good creations and upholding the Mazdayasni religion that he was offered prophetship by Ahura Mazda, which he politely declined, as he did not consider himself fit for that onerous task. Instead, he chose to further the progress of the material world.

Veritably, due to Jamshed's just rule his subjects were very healthy and happy. Ill-health and vices had almost vanished from his kingdom. Nobody knew old age. Father and son looked alike. It seemed that even mother nature was helping King Jamshed in his task of giving maximum comfort to his people, since there was neither extreme heat nor cold in his kingdom. It was indeed a Golden Age in the history of Iran. As a result of abundant prosperity and healthy living conditions, the population of Iran increased manifold, and thrice King Jamshed increased the boundaries of his kingdom.

Human Progress

People in King Jamshed's reign were introduced to many new arts, skills and trades. King Jamshed introduced the art of brick-making and clay-plastering, which gave rise to the art of building houses and palaces. For the first time in the world, people started living in houses. King Jamshed also introduced the art of swimming and the craft of boat-making. Thus sea-faring was introduced to the people. From this started the ancillary arts of diving and pearl-fishing.

Mining started on a larger scale in King Jamshed's time. Metals were made from ores and from metals several useful implements like the plough and the hoe were made. Apart from these implements, swords, spears, helmets and armours were made to be used during warfare. Horse-shoes were fitted to horses giving them greater mobility. Mining of precious metals and stones like gold, silver and diamonds was also initiated during the time of King Jamshed.

King Jamshed introduced his people to the concept of perfumes. which were extracted from musk,

amber and sweet-scented flowers like rose. King Jamshed taught his people the art of fumigation by the use of frankincense, amber, myrrh and camphor.

The art of cloth making was further developed in King Jamshed's reign. Spinning, weaving, warping and woofing were developed. For the first time clothes from *zari* (golden and silvern threads) and silk were made. The art of sewing clothes was also improved to a great extent.

The idea of making musical instruments and composing music was also started during the time of King Jamshed.

King Jamshed introduced many medicinal plants and herbs by the use of which he was able to relieve many diseases and restore health. Many people started practicing medicine, and medicine as a profession started gaining acceptance among people.

Discovery of Wine

The practice of using wine as a medicine started from King Jamshed's time. There is an interesting story about the discovery of wine during King Jamshed's reign. There were huge orchards and vineyards in the palace and fruits from the trees were plucked and stored in gigantic vats.

Once, a maid from the palace was suffering from an incurable disease. Her colleagues and peers in the palace did not only ostracize her, but even her family members shunned her. The maid was in great suffering on account of the disease, and the desertion by her own people, so she decided to end her life.

It had so happened that out of the vats of stored fruits, one vat of grapes had fermented. On account of the foul smell emanating from it, the King and his physicians labelled it as poison. It was kept aside in a desolate place, to be disposed off later on. When the ill maid saw this vat, she decided to drink its contents with the view of ending her life. She drank a cupful from that vat and soon was inebriated and fell asleep. When she awoke, she was not sure as to where she was.

She thought she was in heaven, as much of her pain and discomfort had vanished. However, to her surprise, she realised that she was breathing and very much alive. Not sure about the cause of her well-being, once again she drank a cupful from the vat and again she felt dizzy and went to sleep. This time, when she awoke she was feeling healthier. Her pain and most of the symptoms of her illness had vanished. She was jubilant and decided to inform the king about the miraculous property of the drink in the vat.

The following day the maid went to the King and said, "O King of the World, I have a wonderful news for you, but before I disclose it, I ask your forgiveness for disobeying an order of yours." The King was puzzled at this enigmatic statement and told the maid to clarify her statement. The maid recounted the story of her illness and her miraculous cure. Immediately the King sent his personal physicians to have the brew in the vat tested. The miraculous curative properties of the brew were confirmed and thereafter started the practice of taking wine in moderate quantities as a rejuvenating drink.

Four professional groups

King Jamshed divided his subjects into four professional groups *Athornans* "priests," *Ratheshtars* "warriors," *Vastriyosh* "farmers" and *Hutaokhsh* "craftsmen and artisans." One of the reasons for this fourfold division was to enhance the work quality, as the respective trades would be handed over from father to son, which would provide an opportunity of learning the trades early in life, perfecting them and then passing over the superior techniques to the following generation resulting in greater efficiency.

A few highly devout *Athornans* were specially required to reside on mountains. They had to devote their time to prayers and invoking the blessings of God and other divine beings to ward off evil from the kingdom. So exalted was the position of priests during King Jamshed's reign, that the King regarded himself as a ruler as well as a priest. He says

Manam goft bā farra-e Izadi

Hamam shahryāri o ham mubadi

He said, I am the one with Divine Energy,
I am the king and also a Mubed (priest).

While describing the four professional groups, Firdausi gives a maxim for keeping oneself occupied: "Beware of lethargy, for it has made free man a slave."

King Jamshed had developed a gadget known as *Jām*, by which, he was able to know the past and the future. This contraption was known as the *Jām-i-Jamshed*. Though the word *jām* literally means a goblet, it was probably a gadget, somewhat like a modern telescope. It may even have been a full-fledged observatory from which King Jamshed was able to see the heavenly bodies and using the art of astrology know the past and predict the future by divining the stars, planets and constellations.

King Jamshed was greatly favored by God and other divine beings on account of his piety and benevolent activities God often guided him through Sarosh Yazad, the Yazata bringing intuition. It was through one such insights from Sarosh Yazad that King Jamshed introduced the practice of tying the Kasti (the sacred girdle) on the waist. According to Firdausi the rationale behind this practice was to protect the wearer against evil influences and attracting goodness by leading a life of moderation. Even today, the Kasti is worn on the waist by Zoroastrians to signify moderation in all actions. The Kasti also acts as an indicator of the right path.

The world is submerged

Once God guided King Jamshed through Sarosh Yazad about the arrival of a terrible snow-storm which would submerge the entire world under snow. King Jamshed was not only fore-warned of this catastrophe, he was also advised to take a pair of each species and create a *Vara* "an enclosure" on a mountain to save himself and other good creations from this great catastrophe.

King Jamshed went on a mountain taking with him a pair of most of the species of animals and plants and established a settlement which came to be known as *Var-e-Jam-Kard* "the enclosure made by Jamshed." In this *Vara*, King Jamshed was coronated on the new year day, that is, the day on which the sun enters the house of Aries. It was also the day which heralded spring. King Jamshed sat on a jewel-studded throne wearing a golden crown. He established his benevolent reign and completely subjugated the *daevayasnīs*. So complete was his sway over them, that he sat on his throne and made them lift it and carry him to distant places whenever he desired.

Jamshedi Navroz

A Jashan was celebrated to commemorate King Jamshed's ascension to the throne. Everywhere there was celebration with wine, music and singing. This day came to be known as *Jamshedi Navroz* and was announced as a day of rest and festivity. Even today the festival of Jamshedi Navroz is celebrated with great joy and revelry. In the Kingdom of King Jamshed there was health and happiness all around as everything was in plenty. Hunger and thirst were not known. People were healthy and radiant. There was no aging, debility and disease.

Pride and fall

By and by King Jamshed completed his reign of more than seven centuries. But as time went by, the prosperity and plenty in the kingdom made the king proud of his achievements. One day he

summoned his subjects and elders of the court and proclaimed, “I have realised that there is none in the world like me. I have improved the world and relieved pain and suffering from it. The skills and trades in the world are because of me. Your life and consciousness owe me their existence. What more, the very clothes that you wear and the food you eat is by my grace. So now it is in fitness of things that you call me your God.”

As soon as King Jamshed uttered these words his Divine Glory fled, flying away in the form of a bird. His subjects lost respect and regard for him as their King. Within a period of twenty-three years his entire army deserted him. It was as if God Himself had turned his face away from him. When King Jamshed realised his folly, it was too late to amend.

The people of Iran were thoroughly disillusioned by their King, and went in search for a new king. They found one in Babylon by the name of Zohak. In their eagerness to overthrow their King, they did not realise what they were getting into, when they invited Zohak to come to Iran, assuring him their full support.

Zohak sent a messenger to King Jamshed asking him to surrender. Though King Jamshed was terrified by this message, he challenged Zohak for a battle. Zohak came to Iran with his army and a battle ensued between the two armies, which lasted for forty days. In this battle King Jamshed proved stronger. However, the crafty Zohak changed the pattern of the battle to a duel between the two Kings, which he won by using treacherous means.

King Jamshed flees Iran

Having lost the duel, King Jamshed had to flee Iran to save his life. He changed his identity and wandered from place to place for several years. He took to wearing black clothes as a sign of repentance for his pride which led to his fall.

Meanwhile had Jamshed's face circulated amongst people by embossing it on metals and printing it on cloth and had it. He even proclaimed a reward of tax and revenue exemption for life to anyone who caught Jamshed.

Princess Samannāz

When Jamshed came to know about this proclamation, he changed his identity. Wandering from place to place, he reached Zabulistan, on the border of Afghanistan and Hindustan where King Kurang ruled. Kurang had a beautiful daughter by the name Samannāz. Many suitors had asked for her hand in marriage, but she had rejected all considering none to be worthy enough to be her husband.

One day, Jamshed wandered into the princess' camp asking for food and water. The princess immediately recognised him and gave him food and wine. Then she asked him his identity. Jamshed concealed his identity and introduced himself as Māhān Kuhi.

Samannāz was sure about the true identity of Jamshed. She was totally heartbroken when Jamshed, whom she held in high esteem, lied to her. She confessed that she had been waiting since a long time for his arrival and wanted to marry him. Finally, Jamshed revealed his identity and said that he had to lie for his safety as everywhere people were searching him in expectancy of the reward offered by Zohak. Samannāz promised Jamshed that she would not utter a word about the secret to anyone, and so they married secretly.

After some time Samannāz was expecting a baby. When her father King Kurang came to know about the secret marriage he was furious, but he soon calmed down when he came to know that his son-in-law was none other than Jamshed, former King of Iran. However, the real reason for his happiness was not due to the former greatness of Jamshed, but his desire to hand him over to

Zohak to get the reward, and be in the good books of the new king of Iran. With great difficulty the princess was able to dissuade her father from having Jamshed arrested by Zohak.

In the course of time, a charming son was born to Samannāz. The child's resemblance to his father was so conspicuous, that King Kurang had to persuade Jamshed to leave the palace lest Zohak have any suspicion due to the likeness of his grandson to the former king of Iran, and attack him. Jamshed too realised that it was too dangerous to prolong his stay in Zabulistan, and so, with a heavy heart he left Samannāz and his son Tur in Kurang's care and set off for Hindustan.

Jamshed went in hiding, moving from one place to another. Finally he was located in China by none other than his own half brother Spityur who reported him to Zohak, who ordered to have Jamshed mercilessly killed by having him split into two. Thus ended in utter ignominy the life of one of the greatest Kings of Iran.

King Jamshed is said to have enjoyed a very long life. Though the exact extent of his life and reign is not certain, different texts report it from between 700 years to 1,000 years.

ZOHAK

A very pious and noble King by the name of Khrutasp ruled over Babylon. He had abiding affection for one of his maids, Vadak, and out of this weakness of the King, Zohak was born.

Zohak was a rash, ill-tempered and troublesome child, nevertheless, his father loved him dearly and spared no pains in bringing him up in the best possible manner. Zohak had great love for horses. He possessed ten thousand horses, and hence he was also called *Bivar-asp*.

First encounter with Ablis

Once Ahriman, the Evil Spirit, decided to corrupt Zohak and use him as his pawn. He sent his stooge by setting up a temptation for him. He sent a man by the name Ablis who befriended Zohak and impressed him with his sweet talk.

Zohak did not realise the ill intentions of Ablis and came to be heavily dependent on his advice. Ablis knew that Zohak was too naive and impressionable and started manipulating him as per his evil plans. One day Ablis told Zohak that he had many interesting secrets which he would like to share with him. After generating curiosity in Zohak, he took a promise from him, that once the secrets were revealed, he would have to act on his instructions without asking questions. Further, the evil Ablis directed Zohak not to reveal to anyone whatever he may disclose.

The first secret that he told Zohak was that it did not befit him to live under his father as he himself was a grown up man and fit to be a king. However, since his father still had a long life ahead of him, he would not be able to become a king for a long time, so the only way out was to remove his father Khrutasp from the throne.

Zohak was terrified at this blasphemous advice, but he was bound by the promise to Ablis. Further, Ablis threatened Zohak with great misfortune if his instructions were not heeded. After some hesitation, Zohak agreed to carry out the plan laid down by Ablis.

It was Khrutasp's daily practice to go to the garden for his early morning prayers. Taking advantage of the solitude of the King at that time and the dim light at the time of dawn, Ablis advised Zohak to dig a trench in the garden on the path on which the king traversed daily and place upright weapons therein. Zohak obediently followed the orders.

When Khrutasp went into the garden early the next morning, he fell into the trench and died. This was the first triumph of the Evil Spirit. However, he was not to stop here and would strike twice again.

Zohak becomes the King

Very shortly Zohak coronated himself as the King and Ablis left him by himself to deal with his guilt pangs. Here Firdausi says that however cruel a child may be, he would never contemplate killing his own father, and the reason Firdausi cites for Zohak's ruthlessness is his low lineage.

Ablis strikes again

Ablis was not gone for long. Very shortly he returned to Zohak, this time in the guise of a young chef. He enticed Zohak with names of mouth watering dishes and convinced him to hand over the charge of his kitchen to him. Gullible as he was, Zohak was easily impressed by this glib talker and did accordingly. Thus started the second phase of the Evil Spirit's treachery.

According to Firdausi, mankind were not eating flesh at that time. They were just eating fruits and vegetables. Ablis started the trend of cooking non-vegetarian food. He started with the humble egg and gradually went on to cook birds and cattle. Eating flesh made Zohak blood-thirsty and cruel like a wild beast. On the other hand Ablis started gaining more and more favour with the king due to his palatable cooking.

Zohak had become very fond of the cooking of the new chef. One day he asked the new chef to request for any favour from him. The chef said, "O great King, by your grace I have everything that I could ask for, and so I always pray for your happiness. I just wish you to be happy. However, I have a request, which I do not deem fit to ask because of my low profession. Nevertheless, I am putting forth my desire. If you think me worthy enough, please allow me to kiss your shoulders."

Zohak did not understand the purpose of this strange request and was in fact flattered. He presumed that the chef may have asked for this wish in order to be famous. He granted the wish and Ablis immediately kissed his shoulders. No sooner did he kiss, he disappeared from the palace. Within a short time two black snakes sprang up from Zohak's shoulders, and started troubling him by night and by day.

Ablis strikes the final blow

Zohak became restive and exasperated by the snakes. He tried all means but could not get rid of this scourge. Many medicine men and doctors tried their hands at removing the snakes but were not successful. No remedy seemed to get rid of or pacify the snake. Highly aggravated, he ordered them to be cut. But as soon as one pair was cut another would take their place.

Ablis was aware that the time had come to deal his final blow. He came in the garb of a physician and made the pronouncement that there was no cure for this problem but to feed human brains to the snakes and keep them satiated so that they would not bother the King. He added that the snakes would only eat brains of young and healthy men. And so every day two young men would have to be killed, and their brains fed to the snakes. The wicked objective of the Evil Spirit in this ploy was to make this earth bereft of good, healthy men.

The Iranians invite trouble

Zohak started feeding the snakes daily with brains of two young men. By and by a shortage of young men was felt in his small kingdom. At this unfortunate juncture the people of Iran, disgusted by King Jamshed's attitude, came to invite him to take over their country.

It was not difficult for Zohak to take over the control of Iran with the help of the Iranians themselves. He forced King Jamshed to flee Iran and became the King. Thus started Zohak's reign, a thousand year period of misfortune for Iranians, brought about by their own folly.

In Zohak's reign the wise were ridiculed and the wicked ruled the roost. Sorcery and black magic became the order of the day. People forgot their skills and trades, as they idled their time away in the house, afraid to go out lest they be spotted by Zohak's soldiers and taken away to be fed to the snakes. People were afraid even to speak the truth. There was a reign of terror all over in Iran.

In King Jamshed's palace lived his two daughters Arnavaz and Shernaz, who were forced by Zohak to accept his evil ways. They were taught witchcraft and made queens in Zohak's palace against their wishes.

A mild respite

The practice of daily killing two young men for feeding Zohak's snakes went on for years. Two Iranian brothers Armail and Karmail decided to do something about this. They worked out a strategy and joined Zohak's palace-kitchen as cooks.

Everyday, the two brothers saved the life of one of the two men brought to be killed in the kitchen. The brain of the rescued man was replaced by the brain of a sheep, the two different brains were then mixed thoroughly and fed to the snakes. In this way the two brothers were able to save lives of hundreds of youths who were then strictly advised to flee to the forest and never come within city limits. These people started living nomadic lives in forests and on mountain tops, and Firdausi maintains that the present Kurds are their descendants.

Zohak was in the habit of having his own able bodied soldiers killed if he suspected them to be righteous and truthful. Further, he ordered his soldiers to seize any beautiful woman they saw in the, bring her to his palace to be kept in his harem. By his brutal practices Zohak had made the lives of Iranians a nightmare. Everybody lived under the shadow of death as they were not safe even in their houses.

Zohak's dreams

One night Zohak had a dream in which he saw three young men riding towards his palace. The youngest of the three, who was riding in the middle, looked lustrous and stately and had a royal appearance. He carried a mace with him which was shaped like the head of a cow. He alighted from the horse, smote Zohak with his mace, tied his hands and feet and dragged him to a mountain, with a cheering crowd of people following them.

Zohak woke up from his sleep with a scream, startled and terrified. Arnavaz advised Zohak to ascertain the significance of his dream by consulting priests, astrologers and dream-interpreters. The following morning Zohak summoned the learned people of his court and asked them to explain the significance of his dream. For three days the wise men deliberated. When they interpreted the dream, it was so shocking that none of them dared to disclose it to Zohak, fearing his wrath.

Finally, Zirak, a courageous priest, went to Zohak and told him the interpretation of the dream thus, "O King, this dream forebodes evil tidings. The young lustrous man who bound and dragged you is Faridun. Though he is not yet born, he is destined to end your rule and be the next King of Iran." Zohak was terrified on hearing this.

Trembling, he asked, “But why would he kill me ?” Zirak replied, “To free the people of Iran from your rule and also to avenge the death of his father whom you killed to feed the snakes, and the death of a cow, which had nursed him during childhood, by your soldiers.”

On hearing this terrible news Zohak fell unconscious. As soon as he came to his senses, he realised that the only purpose of his life should be to find Faridun and kill him. Little did he realise that nobody, not even the greatest of Kings, is able to avert the reactions of their past evil deeds.

The birth of Faridun

In due time Faridun was born to a noble lady by the name Faranak. Faridun's father was a young and able bodied man by the name Abtin. He was always in fear of being caught by Zohak's men and so he used to stay in hiding. However, one day Zohak's guards carried him away and killed him. When Faranak came to know of this she was terrified. The only option open to her was to take infant Faridun and go in hiding. She went into a jungle and entrusted her child to a farmer who had a magnificent cow by the name Purmae.

Faranak requested the farmer to look after Faridun and have him nursed by this cow. She entreated the farmer to keep infant Faridun with great care, as the evil Zohak was after the life of this child. After the farmer promised to look after the child, Faranak left Faridun in his care, and left, with a heavy heart.

For three years the farmer took great care of the child and nursed him on the milk of Purmae. The child became very fond of the cow and looked upon her as a mother.

Meanwhile Zohak launched an intense search for Faridun. When he came to know about a magnificent cow nursing a child, Zohak suspected the child to be Faridun and ordered his men to go and search. Faranak had a divine intuition about the threat to her child's life. Before Zohak's men could reach the farmer's house, Faranak reached there, thanked the farmer, took the child from his house and proceeded towards the Alburz mountains. When Zohak's men came to search the farmer's house, they were unable to find Faridun. In frustration they destroyed the house and killed the farmer and the cow Purmae.

Faranak, safe with the child, went to the Alburz mountains where she met a saintly man. She entrusted her child in the hands of that man, requesting him to take great care of the child as it was destined to end Zohak's evil rule.

Faridun grew up in the care of the saintly man who gave him a good upbringing and educated him in the imperial arts of warfare and administration. When Faridun was sixteen years old, he went to his mother and asked her about his father. Faranak told him the story of his birth, his father being killed by Zohak, Zohak's dream and finally Zohak's killing of the cow Purmae which had nursed him during childhood.

Hearing this, Faridun was engulfed with rage and was eager to go and fight against Zohak. His mother constrained him saying that Zohak with his strong army was very powerful. He alone would not be able to fight against him. When the time was ripe, friends and allies would help him in his destined work. As years passed, Faridun waited for the opportunity to come across.

The Mehzar-nameh

Zohak's inability to find Faridun had made him restless and insecure about his life and reign. He was worried about his own safety and so decided to increase the strength of his army.

One day, with a view to win over the noblemen of his court, he summoned them and said, “O wise men, we all know that years ago a child was born, who was to be a threat to our kingdom and my noble reign. As my loyal subjects you would all want me to be protected as you know that I am a wise, just and noble King. With the view of protecting our common interests, I have decided to strengthen the army, and with that purpose I circulate this *Mehzar-nameh* “a pledge of loyalty” which I request you all to sign.” The noblemen had no choice but to sign on the dotted line.

Kaveh, the black-smith

As the *Mehzar-nameh* was being signed, a powerful man angrily stormed into the court shouting and condemning him the king. Zohak was furious at this sudden intrusion and angrily asked the man the reason for this sudden outburst.

The man calmed down and started recounting his sad tale in an intense voice. “I am Kaveh Ahangar, a blacksmith. I have come to ask why I have been singled out for your wrath. I had eighteen sons, but one by one all have been taken away and killed by your soldiers to feed the snakes. Now, my last son who is the only hope and support for my old age, has also been taken away by your soldiers. Even the cruelest king would not be so ruthless. I have come here to demand back my son.”

Zohak realised the urgency in Kaveh's assertive demand and decided to accede to it in order to show his magnanimity before the noblemen of the court. In an act of diplomacy he asked his soldiers to return the son to Kaveh. As Kaveh was leaving, Zohak stopped him and asked him to sign the *Mehzar-nameh*. Kaveh took the document and went it. He saw on it the signatures of the leading men of the court, and was disgusted at the deception of the king and the cowardice of the courtiers. He tore the declaration to shreds, trampled it under his feet and in a fit of anger stormed out of the court.

The courtiers saw in Kaveh's defiance and insolence, a clear sign of Zohak's tyranny coming to an end and the beginning of the new promised reign. Zohak himself realised this and started trembling at the thought of his days being numbered.

Faridun the saviour

Outside the court, Kaveh challenged the conscience of Iranian people. He condemned them for tolerating the evil rule of Zohak for so long and asked them to gather under him so that they can go and search for the promised new king, Faridun. He made a banner from his leather apron by fastening it on his spear. This banner became Iran's national flag all through its five dynasties and came to be known as *Kāvyāni Zundo* “The Flag of Kaveh.” Kaveh was divinely inspired regarding the whereabouts of Faridun, and he led the people to him.

When they reached Faridun on the Alburz mountains, he was ready to go with them. He accepted the flag, decorated it with rich cloth and jewels and went to seek his mother's permission to set out on war against Zohak. The proud mother blessed her son and asked his two elder brothers Kyanush and Purmae to accompany him.

Faridun ordered a blacksmith to prepare a special mace for him before he set out on the war. The mace was to be adorned with the head of a cow to remind him to teach a lesson to the evil Zohak who had mercilessly ordered the killing of the cow which had nursed him during infancy. As per Faridun's specifications, the blacksmith prepared a mace was called Gurz, and presented it to him. This mace was called the *Gurz*. Faridun richly rewarded the blacksmith and set out for war against Zohak with a big army led by Kaveh.

Faridun sets out for a war:

Faridun, along with a big army led by Kaveh, set off for war against Zohak. As Faridun was on his way, Sarosh Yazad came to him to teach him *Afsuns* and *Nirangs*, which were small prayers, which would be useful to him to counter the evil powers of Zohak's black magic and sorcery.

Trials and tribulations on the way

One night, as Faridun and his soldiers were resting under a mountain after dinner, the two brothers of Faridun, envious of his growing stature, attempted to crush him to death. They rolled a huge boulder from the high mountain. The rumble of the boulder woke up Faridun who immediately chanted a *Nirang* which changed the course of the boulder.

Narrowly escaping death, Faridun went to sleep and did not recount this incident to anybody. Faridun's brothers soon realised their mistake and apologised for their petty mindedness to their magnanimous brother who immediately forgave them.

The advancing army came near the Arvand (Tigris) river. Faridun requested the boatman Vifra-Navaz to ferry him and his soldiers across the river. The boatman explained to Faridun that though he had great respect for him, he would not be able to do so as his King Zohak had ordered him not to ferry anybody without his permission.

Enraged, Faridun metamorphosed him into a bird. The boatman remained in that form and kept hovering in the sky for three days and nights. He entreated Avan Yazad to save him. Avan Yazad intervened and Vifra-Navaza was brought back to his human form by Faridun.

Faridun chanted Nirangs and was able to safely cross the river on horseback, followed by his soldiers. Miraculously the river water did not come above the saddle of the horses. Thus they reached Zohak's capital Baet-ul-Mukaddas (Jerusalem) where his palace Gang Dezhukht was situated.

Faridun reaches Zohak's palace

Faridun majestically rode into Zohak's palace chanting Nirangs and breaking the evil magical cordon set up by Zohak. No soldier of Zohak dared to stop him. Whoever came before him became the victim of his powerful *Gurz*. Faridun defeated all the black magicians and sorcerers who served in the palace. The magic spells cast over the ladies in the harem were broken by giving them *Nahan* "ceremonial bath."

Arnavaz and Shernaz were also freed of the evil spells. The sisters were overjoyed to see Faridun. They told him all the secrets they knew about Zohak, and also informed him that Faridun that Zohak had gone towards Hindustan to seek a new kingdom for himself, as he feared the end of his reign in Iran. They assured Faridun that he alone was destined to free Iran from Zohak's evil rule by breaking through the spell which protected the evil King.

Kundarav, the palace custodian

When the palace custodian Kundarav came the following day, he was surprised to see Faridun in the palace. Realising the futility of opposing Faridun, he saluted him, and when asked for, gave all the information about the secret chambers of the palace. Thereafter Faridun ordered Kundarav to arrange for a grand banquet that night.

At night, when the banquet was in progress, Kundarav set out to look for Zohak. After finding him, he was informed that exactly according to his dream three men had come and taken charge of his palace. The youngest, who was the bravest and most impressive of all had broken all evil spells, killed all sorcerers and freed all the ladies from the harem.

Zohak realised that this young man was none other than Faridun his end was drawing near. He collected whatever soldiers he could and rode towards his palace

Zohak returns to his palace

When Zohak reached the palace, he realised that he neither had support from his army nor his subjects. In fact, the subjects were shouting slogans against Zohak calling him worse than a wild beast. Zohak realised the futility of challenging Faridun. In a final desperate attempt he swore to kill Arnavaz and Shernaz whom he considered betrayers. He entered their room through a portico with a dagger in his hand and was about to strike them, when Faridun came rushing in and attacked him with his sword. A fierce scuffle took place between the two. Just when Faridun was about to smite Zohak with his Gurz, Sarosh Yazad intervened and advised him not to kill Zohak. Instead he directed Faridun to secure Zohak in chains and imprison him in the mountains.

End of Zohak's evil reign

Faridun bound Zohak on camel back and took him to Mount Demavand, the highest peak of the Alburz mountains. The people of Iran triumphantly followed him, shouting slogans against Zohak. As Faridun was about to hang Zohak upside down on the mountains, Sarosh Yazad once again intervened and cautioned him against hanging Zohak upside down. He advised him to tightly secure Zohak in chains and imprison him. Faridun accordingly imprisoned Zohak in a deep dungeon in Mount Demavand.

Legend has it that Zohak is still imprisoned in Mount Demavand. Every night he nips at the iron chains that bind him and makes them extremely thin, but as they are on the verge of snapping, morning dawns with the crow of the rooster which restores the chains to their original size. This allegorical story signifies that the forces of evil are at their zenith during the night, and they try to annihilate the world, but when morning dawns, the good forces in the universe, symbolised by the rooster representing Sarosh Yazad, become powerful once again and the evil forces have to retreat.

According to scriptures, as the end of the world will approach, the power of evil will increase and Zohak will free himself from the chains that bind him. He would once again reign over the world for one year. After that year, his life and reign will be brought to an end by the great Iranian Paladin Kersasp.

FARIDUN

Ascension to the throne

We have read about Faridun's birth, upbringing and his battle against Zohak. After imprisoning Zohak in Mount Demavand, Faridun shifted Iran's capital from Baet-ul-Mukaddas to Varena. He ascended the throne on roz Hormazd of mah Meher and fifteen days thereafter celebrated a thanksgiving Jashan on roz Meher of mah Meher. This Jashan, known as the Jashan-e-Mehrangān, is celebrated even today to commemorate the end of Zohak's rule and Faridun's ascension to throne.

After Faridun ascended the throne, he proclaimed his divine appointment to his subjects and assured them full justice. In his reign, people regained their lost confidence, and resumed work in their hereditary professions. They started going out of their houses, which they had stopped on account of fear of being captured by Zohak's soldiers. King Faridun asked the farmers to resume cultivation of their fertile fields which had been lying fallow all these years.

Faridun's mother Faranak was overjoyed at his son's ascension to the throne. She thanked Ahura Mazda by offering prayers and burning incense on fire. She fed the poor and the needy and did so much charity from the money she had saved that there was no beggar left in her town.

After becoming the king, Faridun married Arnavaz and Shernaz whom he had freed from Zohak's clutches and who had helped him to defeat Zohak. Faridun had three sons, two elder ones borne by Shernaz and the youngest by Arnavaz. Faridun did not give names to either of the three sons because they were too beloved to him.

Brides for the princes

When Faridun was fifty years old, he decided to have his sons married. He ordered his trusted officer Jandal to look for 3 sisters who would be suitable as their brides. They should be very beautiful and so beloved of their father that they too, like his sons, should not have been named. Jandal searched far and wide in entire Iran, but nowhere did he find three sisters as specified by Faridun. Then Jandal came to know that King Sarv of Yaman (Arabia Felix) had three beautiful daughters who were not yet named.

Jandal immediately set off for Yaman, met the King and presented him valuable gifts. When Jandal forwarded Faridun's proposal to the king, he was not very happy as he loved his daughters too dearly to part with them. He requested Jandal to give him some time to think over the proposal.

The following day King Sarv consulted the wise men of his court as to how he could refuse the proposal, without offending the great King of Iran. The wise men conferred and said that, if King Sarv rejected the proposal outright, King Faridun may declare a war. If King Sarv did not want a war, he should accept the proposal and ask for costly gifts, so that King Faridun himself may take back the proposal.

King Sarv did not like the suggestions made by his courtiers, so he himself devised a devious plan. The following day, he summoned Jandal and told him that King Faridun's proposal was acceptable by him with the condition that he be allowed to test the princes before allowing them to marry his daughters. Jandal agreed to the proposal and returned to Iran, delighted that his mission was successful.

Jandal returned to Varena and told King Faridun that the brides were found and the proposal accepted. The King was very happy and he prepared his sons to go to Yaman. Through Jandal he informed them that King Sarv will organise a banquet for them, in which they will be tested. The king will make his daughters sit with the princes, but not in order. The eldest would be sitting besides the youngest and the middle sister would be seated the last. If the king asked them whether the sisters were sitting in the correct order, as per their age, they should give an appropriate answer and correct the seating order. Thus Faridun prepared his princes for their adventure.

The princes set off for Yaman

With words of advice and counsel and a few Nirangs from their father, the princes set off for Yaman with an entourage of soldiers bearing costly gifts. The princes reached Yaman where a banquet was organised for them. In the banquet questions were asked to the princes regarding the seating order of the princesses, which they answered to the king's satisfaction. The king had to give a half-hearted consent for the marriage, even though he resented the thought of being separated from his daughters.

As a last attempt, to stall the proposed marriages, the King devised a treacherous plan. He organised another banquet in the princes' honour and had them intoxicated by making them drink a lot of wine. Inebriated, the princes went to sleep in the banquet hall. The King then executed the rest of his plan by creating sub-zero temperatures and blowing cold winds by his magical powers, so that the princes would freeze to death.

The princes were not as inebriated as the king had thought. They came back to sobriety and soon realised that they were trapped by the sorcery of the King. They chanted Nirangs given to them by